

**Date:** May 11, 2010

English Roundtable Web Chat on **“Active Language Learning Pedagogy”**

### **Abstract:**

In this web-chat, we are going to explore effective ways to implement active learning pedagogical methods in the EFL classrooms.

With the effort to pull away from traditional teacher-centered approach, we will discuss how to wisely organize student-centered classrooms where learners can actively engage in their own learning, selecting their choices of materials, as well as critically and creatively finding solutions when encountering their language learning problems.

Particularly, by allowing students to engage actively with their own learning, teachers recognize the importance of learners' differences. They welcome both individuality and diversity in their classrooms. Thus, making the learning more rewarding, engaging, lasting, and fun. Some teachers practice active pedagogy in their classrooms everyday while others find it to be an entirely new philosophy to the practice of teaching.

Let's exchange ideas and share together our experiences to maximize our students learning potential and explore the best way possible to promote effective active learning pedagogy in our classrooms.

## **Transcript**

**Damon Anderson:** Welcome everyone. We will begin our chat in about five minutes. Please feel free to submit any pre-questions or comments. Thank you.

**Damon Anderson:** Welcome everyone. Let's begin our chat.

**Damon Anderson:** We have heard much about student centered classrooms, but many teachers are still uncomfortable with this. They seem to be reluctant to give more responsibility to the students. Would you agree with this?

**Wang Ping 2:** Welcome everyone! If this is your first time to our Chat, would you mind introducing yourself a little bit?

**Damon Anderson:** Many teachers put student into groups, but the activities are still extremely teacher controlled.

**Phanisara:** I agree. Teachers need to be willing to lose control a little bit. Let the students be active. Not just the teachers.

**Cheng & Wei:** We are English teachers in Beijing.

**Wang Ping 2:** Damon and Nina, as both a teacher and parent, I'd like to say, "Never work harder than your students and kids!"

**Damon Anderson:** Ping, perhaps you can point out some things from the ppt you designed for today that help to lead students to be more responsible.

**Phanisara:** I agree with you Ping.

**Damon Anderson:** That is actually the title of a book, Ping: Never work harder than your students.

**Cheng & Wei:** What is the most efficient method to teach the new words before learning a new passage?

**Wang Ping 2:** Yes, Damon.

**Damon Anderson:** Vocabulary is always a big issue. First you must decide if the words should be in the students' everyday, active vocabulary, or just in their recognition vocabulary. Too many teachers want student to have all words in their active vocabulary right away.

**hongmen:** I totally agree. It sounds like teachers want to show their power and the difference so in many cases, they do not let students contribute their own ideas of active learning

**Cheng & Wei:** What's the best way to show the students the new words? Just telling them is boring.

**Damon Anderson:** We have to remember that our classes should be about the students learning and not our teaching!!

**Wang Ping 2:** For instance, on Slide 7, when students give you an answer "72", don't be content just with that. Ask how the student gets there. What's the logic and reason behind the answer.

**giangnac:** giving some attractive pictures

**Phanisara:** Even with the learning of new set of vocabularies, the students can actively make their own list of words that they already know to begin expanding to the new related words, terms, and apply to the passages.

**Damon Anderson:** We need to see what the neurolinguists are telling us. Students need to build mental hooks to remember things like new vocabulary words. We have to help them build these hooks.

**Damon Anderson:** But each person must build their own hooks. What works for the teacher does not necessarily work for every student in the class.

**Wang Ping 2:** Mmm, vocabulary learning, what about have students to categorize the new words into different groups and justify why they group the words that way. Allow for different approaches and answers! You could also do making up a story in turn with the new words.

**Phanisara:** So true about students learning. Not to focus too much on just our teaching --and having to follow exact lesson plans that might have been established by someone else who don't know our students.

**Cheng & Wei:** We have maybe 30 new words for a new passage but with only 40 minutes for it, so how to teach them new words is always a question.

**Phanisara:** We have to be ready to be flexible. And collaborate with our students.

**Cheng & Wei:** How to motivate students to learn new words actively?

**Wang Ping 2:** Cheng & Wei, before we start teaching the vocabulary, we always need to ask ourselves the question, why do our students need to learn these words? If you want to prepare them to better communicate in real life with newly acquired vocabulary, then you'd teach very differently if you just want to teach them to pass the vocabulary test. Do you agree?

**Phanisara:** I love the last slide. Regarding mutual respect between teachers and students---not bossiness but collaboration.

**Fidelia:** I am so eager to collaborate with my students and to find out what they want to learn. But students seem reluctant to give input on this. Or even know where to begin to articulate what they want to learn and what their needs are. I know others in Thailand who also struggle with this.

**Damon Anderson:** I would introduce the words orally, then have the students sit in groups with dictionaries and the story or text. They can first guess at the meaning of the words or part of the meaning (is it a negative or positive) and the part of speech based on how it is used in the text. Look the word up in the dictionary to confirm the meaning. When they have a good definition, write them down. Have the groups share. Once the meaning are understood, have each group write a story using all the words. It will be easier to remember one story than 40 words.

**Phanisara:** I agree with Ping. The purpose. Recognizing the learning goals and outcome will determine the type of activities we can do with the students.

**Fidelia:** Wow, Damon. That's a great vocabulary-teaching suggestion. Stories make great "hooks".

**Damon Anderson:** I like the slide with clarifying questions. These are much better than the usual comprehension questions that are asked.

**Cheng & Wei:** We agree that it will be easier to remember one story than 40 words

**Phanisara:** I love Damon's advice. That's really learning words through context. Then the students will know that they will use this particular words and terms when talking about a particular issue, content, and setting.

**Cheng & Wei:** Yes, giving some questions in detail will stimulate the students to talk and avoid having nothing to say

**Damon Anderson:** When we ask a student a question, it should be a real question and we should be willing to listen to their answer.

**Damon Anderson:** If we need them to clarify or define or support their answer, then we will know whether or not they comprehended the text or talk.

**Fidelia:** I am having trouble reading the slide show. The print is small and I can't seem to zoom in.

**Cheng & Wei:** The problem is that sometimes we find it hard to propose questions related to the topic we are teaching

**Wang Ping 2:** One of the strategies mentioned in the book which is featured in the PPT, is about to make your class really fast-paced in order to prevent students from tuning out. That is, as soon as you see two or three students tuning out, make a change in either the activity or the procedures. How do you like about that?

**Damon Anderson:** Sometimes they are tuning out because the teacher seems to be always calling on the same students and not giving everyone a chance. I think the teacher needs to think about why the students may be tuning out.

**Fidelia:** Thanks! The smaller print is still a bit small, but better.

**Wang Ping 2:** Fidelia, have you tried to click on the full screen button below the PPT. Then you can click on the back button to get back to the chat pod.

**Damon Anderson:** Fidelia, you can click on the full screen button and read the ppt, then click again to get back to the chat.

**Cheng & Wei:** Yes, we even should have some alternatives for our designed activities in case that the students may not be interested

**Fidelia:** Thanks, I'll try that.

**Phanisara:** How to critically propose questions in the process of learning are the challenge for many Asian students. We just use to the teachers filling in our brain--passively. Not actively asking something we want to learn in the beginning of our learning processes.

**yun tianying:** Is it possible for you to show us some effective activities in class?

**Tony JLU:** How can teachers encourage learner autonomy in their classrooms if they themselves are not autonomous?

**Wang Ping 2:** Anyway, the PPT is only meant to share with a tiny portion of the ideas and strategies the book has to offer. If possible, I'd suggest everyone to get a copy of the book :-)

**Fidelia:** Nina, this is what I was getting at earlier. How to break through this pattern can be such a puzzle.

**Damon Anderson:** Tony, that is a key question. Teachers would need to consider more prep time to prepare themselves better.

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** i think think yun's question is aslo mine. It's a good one. Sometimes I find it hard to get ideas for activities in my lesson plan

**Damon Anderson:** Le and Yun, one good thing is to use key words to get students to give you more in their answers to you: expand, explain, give more....

**Cheng & Wei:** Another difficulty we are facing is there are always several students who are quiet and reluctant to involve themselves

**Phanisara:** This is why students can learn English for over ten years and can't never carry on any conversation. They never have the ownership of learning. It is a new learning philosophy for Thai education that the Ministry would like to implement critical thinking in the language classrooms. Encourage students to talk, to question. It will take time.

**Truong CDCD:** I wan to ask how to chose a subject which suitation with my abilyson

**Damon Anderson:** One activity is to give the students a very short story. Have them read it quickly (not slowly) once. Then have them read it again and this time do three things: underline things they find interesting, put a question mark by things they don't understand or want to know more about, and circle things they want to remember. Begin your discussion from these things.

**Wang Ping 2:** yun and Le: sometimes I think it's not that teachers are short of ideas, it's the way that teachers communicate the purpose and procedues about the activity to the students that makes the difference. Same group discussion, same topic, same group members, but teachers' talk makes the diffrence. How do you like the slide with the clarifying questions? How teacher talk can help bring the learning tasks meaningful and purposeful to our students?

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** thank you so much for your response.

**Phanisara:** We have to encourage them to talk, to make decision, to make suggestion. They won't if they think what they will say can hurt them---meaning will be put down or lower their grade.

**yun tianying:** thanks.

**Fidelia:** Does anyone have strategies or suggestions for first steps in the process of transferring ownership of English/agency of learning to students who are stuck in receptive mode?

**Damon Anderson:** The students need to make an investment in an activity if they are going to stay engaged in it.

**Violet Zhang:** Critical thinking can really help students to think, and raise questions. If students can't think well, how can they pose questions?

**hongmen:** agree with Cheng, if those students avoid involving themselves, we must take care of them more, do not forget them and just get ideas from other active students

**Tony JLU:** Phanisara: How comfortable are the Thai teachers you work with in terms of asking 'critical thinking' questions?

**Damon Anderson:** They can ask simple questions to help them understand.

**Damon Anderson:** I think that people are thinking too hard about what a critical question might be and are too afraid of what the answers might be.

**Damon Anderson:** Just a simple question: What do you mean? is a good critical thinking question.

**Phanisara:** Students will think about something that's relevant and important to them. Specific activities can even be designed by the students. With the students who are not used to "thinking" ---the teacher might have to give them some samples and options to let their creative juices going.

**Damon Anderson:** Students need to know that they have the "freedom" to try, to fail, to succeed, and to try again, as well as the "freedom" to be themselves with English.

**Fidelia:** In my experience, with teachers in primary and especially Thai secondary context, I don't see it a lot. It could be due to a lot of factors, but probably mainly that the language simply isn't there yet to respond.

**Cheng & Wei:** In China, generally speaking, teachers have to give priority to finish the courses according to the syllabus, then have the time to think about how to organize effective activities .What a dilemma

**Fidelia:** Damon, how do we make an environment for this? Especially when the sense isn't there at all. How do we set a precedent?

**Damon Anderson:** That is a great question, Fidelia.

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** Could you please tell me that communicative approach is to teach the four skill at the same time or we can break down at different moment. Is it a good idea to mainly focus on their oral skill?

**Wang Ping 2:** There's a strategy about posting and discussing truth signs that remind students of core truths about learning. Signs such as: Everyone needs time to think and learn. Or, We each learn in our own ways, by our own time clocks. or, It's Ok to make mistakes. That's the way we learn. or, It's intelligent to ask for help. No one needs to do it all alone. Teachers can use these signs to remind students that people learn in different ways and at different times. She can also invite students to share what they think about these truth.

**Tony JLU:** Damon: A possible 'critical thinking' question is: "What could be three long-term consequences of this text if read by the majority of students in our school?"

**Phanisara:** I absolutely love your signs Ping. That will help our learners to be lifelong learners. That really create the atmosphere for this new learning philosophy.

**Fidelia:** That's a good idea, Ping. Signs often are ignored, but if the teacher brings attention to them, and especially, asks critical questions about them, then students will notice them and hopefully integrate the message.

**Damon Anderson:** That is a good question, but teachers would not ask it because they are afraid they cannot assess the possible answers. How do you get teachers to understand that answers to questions like that can all be good if the students show support for their answers?

**Wang Ping 2:** Thank you Nina and Fidelia. I'm just quoting ideas from the book. I can't help loving it.

**Damon Anderson:** Ping is becoming an addict to the books we have in the RELO Resource Center in Beijing.

**Fidelia:** Seems like a great book, Ping. Is it specific to language teaching? Thanks a lot for making the slide show and introducing this resource.

**Phanisara:** Truly great books!

**Violet Zhang:** I agree with you, Phanisara. Is that a good way for teachers to invite students to create some class activities?

**Damon Anderson:** Nina and Ping, you have come up with some really excellent ideas today. Thank you!!

**Lucy:** Having student's participation in the class activities is really a good idea!

**Cheng & Wei:** Yes, I agree with Violet, the students tend to be more active if they have chance to create activities

**Wang Ping 2:** It's not just for language teaching. Many of the strategies could be applied to all subjects. I guess educating philosophy is about the same across different disciplines.

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** I'm an English teacher in HCMC, Vietnam. My major is in Applied Linguistics.

**Phanisara:** Absolutely Violet. A bit scary to let go of our "control"---but we'll be surprised at the outcome and creativity of our students when we allow them to carry out their own ideas, project works, presentations, and activities (of course---around the prescribed curriculum).

**Cheng & Wei:** Now we are trying to apply the student-centered method in our teaching process.

**Lucy:** But it is not easy, the key is how to maintain students' enthusiasm

**Damon Anderson:** We have many books that come from the field of education. Education is often ahead of us in TEFL in terms of things like methodology, techniques and such. Multiple Intelligences came for education, for example.

**Phanisara:** Agree. Across disciplines. Empowering the learners.

**CDCD Ha Tay:** How to encourage students to create activities in class?

**Fidelia:** Cheng & Wei, what is your approach for transitioning to student-centered?

**CDCD Ha Tay:** Sometimes they are too shy to do so.

**Damon Anderson:** Part of what seems to keep students quiet is that they don't always understand the goals of what is going on in class. Give them clear instructions and goals. Use rubrics to help them understand how they are proceeding toward the goals.

**Cheng & Wei:** We sometimes act just like directors. We may give them assignments before the class, of course some interesting ones or in a competitive way for the groups.

**Wang Ping 2:** CDCD Ha Tay, maybe we can have students create some activity by first identifying a problem or something they want to improve/make a change in their life? Followed by steps and justifications to make that change happen. For instance, try not to stay up late. This can be related to self-management, being efficient and effective.

**lucy:** yes, but students has great desire for expressing themselves than we expected if teacher can better guide the class

**Fidelia:** Lucy, I think you're so right. And it goes along with Damon's point that Ss are often quiet when they can't track what's going on or don't understand directions.

**Cheng & Wei:** I once divided the students into groups to choose a paragraph to analyse the next day, and I found the outcome was amazing.

**Phanisara:** Great sample, Cheng & Wei.

**Damon Anderson:** Everyone, we are almost out of time. This has been a stimulating chat. What would you like to discuss in the next chat? Or should we take July and August off?

**Cheng & Wei:** Just as Ping mentioned above, if we tried to give students more chances to present, to invent the ways how to learn, the result tends to be more rewarding.

**Phanisara:** Yes I totally agree with clear direction. Students can not be creative in their own learning process if they don't know where they are headed. Teachers do need to monitor them and guiding them along.

**Fidelia:** What about how we as teachers can be clear communicators of directions and goals?



**Fidelia:** I mean for another WebChat topic.

**Cheng & Wei:** We have to bear in mind that they are second language learners.

**Phanisara:** Excellent suggestion Fidelia. And agree with Cheng. For me, I let you decide whether or not to skip the chat for the next months.

**Fidelia:** What about June?

**Tony JLU:** Damon: I think two summer sessions would help us to continue to reflect on our teaching.

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** i hope we we'll see each other soon.

**Wang Ping 2:** Thanks to Nina for writing up the blurb and suggest the topic for this chat. I feel RELO Beijing and Bangkok office are merging into one....

**Violet Zhang:** Great idea! We as teachers need reflection on teaching

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** as soon as possible i mean.

**Cheng & Wei:** What about introduce some new ways into our teaching, for example, show the movies in class and get them to discuss anything related to the movies

**Phanisara:** Thank you everybody.

**Fidelia:** Yes, thank you all! This is always energizing and encouraging.

**Cheng & Wei:** See you next time!

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** Good bye, see you later.

**lucy:** I am a little late today. But I enjoy it very much. Thank you , wangping

**Damon Anderson:** Thank you everyone. We will send you an update about our next web chat.

**Lê Trần Loan Phương:** Thank you so much for all.

**Damon Anderson:** Thank you Khun Nina and Wang Ping for all you did for this excellent chat today!!!

**Cheng & Wei:** Nice talking here!

**CDCD Ha Tay:** See everyone next time

**Wang Ping 2:** Thank you all. Hope to talk to you soon!

**billneu:** bye